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AUTHOR Schaefer, June M.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In 1990 the Michigan Inclusive Education Initiative was implemented by the state department of education to facilitate full inclusion of disabled students into regular classroom settings. This paper reports on implementation of inclusive education within the Marquette-Alger Intermediate School District (MAISD) in the Upper Peninsula region of Michigan. The MAISD consists of 12 rural school districts with a K-12 population of approximately 15,000 students, of which 10 percent receive special education services. The MAISD "systems change" required commitment from the 12 local district superintendents to decentralize special education operations from MAISD to local school districts; integrate special education students within the local district transportation system; change the MAISD's role from operations to extensive leadership in staff development; continue parent/family support systems; and integrate special education planning at the local level, assuring site-based decision-making. The role of MAISD staff in providing technical assistance and staff development leadership to the local districts was critical to the success of program development and implementation. In 1993 the MAISD expanded its technical assistance and staff development services to other Intermediate School Districts that were developing inclusive education programs. An evaluation of the MAISD and its regional systems-change initiatives revealed that the degree of impact on the teaching/learning process for children was highly related to the nature and continuity of staff development experiences. (LP)

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June M. Schaefer, Ph.D.
Marquette-Alger ISD
Marquette, Michigan

John Lindholm
Delta-Schoolcraft ISD
Escanaba, Michigan

Barbara LeRoy, Ph.D.
Developmental Disabilities Institute
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

"HARNESSING THE RESOURCES THAT ABOUND WITHIN RURAL SCHOOLS TO CREATE SYSTEMS CHANGE FOR ALL KIDS"

Background Information/State Level Initiative

During the 1970's students with varying degrees of disabilities were attending some public schools in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan - but the momentum within the state and much of the country was to build "separate" schools for these students. Parents and educators held forums within the Marquette-Alger Intermediate School District (MAISD) during this time as to whether funds should be directed to building a new site or to renovate existing public school sites for increased accessibility. Discussion was heated, but the majority of persons supported the integration of special education programs within existing school sites - even for children with the most severe disabilities. One "segregated" rental site was retained to satisfy the dissenters. Thus, the era of "least restrictive environment" began in this northern section of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Even with this bold leap of integration and mainstreaming within the public school and university setting (for young adults), programs continued to be centralized. Students traveled long distances on buses (up to 2 to 2 1/2 hours one way) to attend MAISD operated programs within the Marquette area. Local districts did not regard these students as "their" students - they "belonged" to the MAISD. Many students "graduated" from MAISD programs having never set foot in the halls of their local school district or having any experiences with the staff and students within their local school district.

On January 10, 1984, the State Board of Education in Michigan passed a policy entitled "The Educational Assignment of Handicapped Children and Youth to Separate Facilities: A Policy Regarding Least Restrictive Environment". With this policy came momentum for the districts in the Upper Peninsula to review additional options for students with disabilities in regular education. Many less restrictive options were emerging, but the Administrative Rules for Special Education in Michigan proved to be inhibiting in many instances - creating barriers regarding flexibility and funding options. A glimmer of hope surfaced in October, 1989, when the Office of Special Education Services, Michigan Department of Education, in cooperation with the Developmental Disabilities Institute at Wayne State University, began implementation of a five-year OSERS - sponsored systems change project to facilitate inclusive education. The State Board of Education in Michigan followed suit with an official statement in 1990 (later confirmed in 1992) which defined inclusive education as follows:

> The provision of educational services for students with disabilities, in schools where non-handicapped peers attend, in age-appropriate **general education classes under the direct supervision of general education teachers, with special education support and assistance as determined appropriate through the individualized educational planning committee (IEPC).**

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The Michigan Inclusive Education Initiative provided the framework within which the MAISD could revisit the basic special educational operational questions such as centralization, LRE options to include inclusion, transportation, funding and staff development. All of these factors focused on a major "systems change" for the twelve local school districts within MAISD which would also subsequently lead to widespread changes in other districts within the Upper Peninsula. During the first year of the Michigan Inclusive Education Initiative (1990-91) four ISD's and three local school districts in the state participated. MAISD was the only ISD where all local constituent districts agreed to participate for overall regional "systems change".

Being accepted as an Implementation Site by the Michigan Inclusive Education Initiative provided access to additional resources for the MAISD through technical assistance, research and leadership in the staff development process. Early on in the process, an agreement was formulated so that MAISD's goals were met in regard to long-term systems change. The MAISD administration wanted to develop a high level of consulting skills within their staff so that they could be readily available to support educators and parents within the local school districts on LRE implementation. It was critical that the staff from the State Initiative serve as technical assistants to the MAISD - so that they were not perceived as developing awareness levels of expertise only - and then not being available to local teachers/parents after the project was completed. MAISD staff were placed in leadership roles to provide technical assistance within respective districts they served - as a result, this has remained to be the "backbone" of MAISD's systems change efforts.

An Example of an ISD Systems Change Project

The MAISD encompasses a two county area of 2, 786 square miles with a K-12 population of approximately 15,000 students. The annual special education count represents approximately 10 percent of this population or 1500 students. Twelve school districts make up the rural constituency of this ISD. The districts have combined into four cooperatives (Co-ops) to better serve low incidence needs.

"Systems change" within the framework of the Michigan Inclusion Imitative required a major commitment of the twelve local district superintendents to consider the following basic principles:

- decentralized special education operations for persons with moderate to severe impairments from MAISD to local school districts;
- discontinuation of MAISD special education transportation services; integration of these students within the local district transportation systems;
- transition of MAISD's role from operations to one of extensive leadership in staff development reflected through development of regional expertise in each Co-op with MAISD staff as lead consultants to guide local district educators in successful strategies for curriculum accommodation, positive behavioral intervention, assistive technology applications, transition and consultation model for assessment/diagnostic services;
- continuation of parent/family support systems on an interagency basis;
- integration of special education planning into the school improvement process legally mandated for local districts which assures site-based decision-making at the building level.

This commitment required an intensive study for the superintendents spanning from 1988-91. Decisions were made to abolish the MAISD special education transportation system as of June 1991. Classroom operations were transitioned to the local school districts during the 1992-93 and 1993-94 school years. All staff associated with these programs were laid off from the MAISD and applied for jobs within the local school districts. As per the School Code in Michigan seniority rights were retained by classroom personnel and placement for salary/benefit packages were made with respect to seniority previously recognized at MAISD. Planning meetings were held with union leadership from all respective districts

and the Superintendents Standing Committee on Special Education to accomplish a smooth transition. As a result, only four personnel remained on lay-off status at the MAISD upon culmination of these arrangements. All of these people have acquired positions in various capacities since that time.

To implement a systems change effort of this magnitude, staff development was a key component in restructuring the overall framework of responsibilities. The MAISD Special Education Administration developed an Accountability/Decision Facilitation Framework for Staff Development which was approved by the Superintendents' Roundtable. The mission statement reads:

> Local school districts will demonstrate the expertise necessary for planning, implementing and evaluating least restrictive environment (LRE) services and options for students through staff development and technical assistance that focuses on:
>
> - teacher attitudes/instructional behaviors,
> - relationships among special/general/vocational educators and the community,
> - implementation of the intents within federal/state, legislation, policies, guidelines and projects, and
> - the quality, relevance and effectiveness of special education programs/services.

Goals for staff development are established annually within the priorities highlighted by the area needs assessment process.

Principles which have emerged from this systems change project include:

- Recognizing the central/pivotal role of the respective school building's school improvement plan as an overarching framework for staff/student/parent development;
- Treating staff/students/parents with dignity and respect;
- Honoring and respecting building level diversity within the local school district as reflected in the school improvement process;
- Promoting building level decision-making to develop a continuum of options for the IEP Committee;
- Employing flexible, accessible and responsive options for students based on functional life-related planning;
- Sharing relevant information with educators/families about all available resources;
- Encouraging educator/family collaboration and partnerships;
- Employing staff development practices which focus on serving ALL students;
- Encouraging teacher to teacher and student to student support systems;
- Using the "broader community", e.g. other school districts, agencies, businesses, universities, etc. as a context for supporting students with special needs;
- Mobilizing and building district "teams" to assist other educators/parents develop the levels of knowledge/skill necessary to serve ALL children.

All twelve districts within the MAISD are implementing unique plans to serve the students with disabilities within their buildings - no two implementation plans are exactly the same. Some buildings employ co-teaching models, others work in collaborative teams in which the special education staff have varying roles as determined by the needs, in other buildings LRE aides have provided an extra level of support to assure meaningful experiences occur for all students - the key has been on "what works" for the respective building staff based on the skills and resources that each member brings to the situation. The critical element which has been necessary on a continuous basis in all implementation sites has been a central source for staff development leadership, facilitation, fiscal resources and assessment of needs. MAISD's administrative staff have assumed this responsibility and continues to provide the network of resources which must be brought together to assist educators and parents in developing effective implementation plans. All MAISD special education consulting staff assume various roles in providing technical assistance to building/district staff - they have become "generalists" in responding to the variety of needs which any student in the building may have.

The twelve superintendents have become very proficient in determining overall district-wide priorities for students with disabilities as a result of their individual district experiences, inter-district collaboration and regional decision-making responsibilities. They are very sensitive to the range of needs within their student population and aware of the complexity involved in responding to these needs with limited resources. Once again, the strong central resource of administrative facilitation from the ISD is critical to all twelve superintendents in order to establish consistency in standards/practices, a clear working knowledge of the service delivery system, and an equitable distribution of resources based on prioritization of needs. The MAISD Superintendents' Standing Committee on Special Education meets regularly with the MAISD Special Education Director. In turn this committee reports to the MAISD Superintendents' Roundtable monthly and seeks collaborative agreements as necessary. The Standing Committee provides input/feedback on the MAISD Special Education Budget throughout the development process.

Extensive systems change within this two-county area has been largely successful because of the commitment from the superintendents' as educational leaders to "harness" their respective districts' resources in collaboration with the MAISD to provide a better continuum of educational options for ALL students.

Regional Technical Assistance/Staff Development

In 1993 the Director of the Michigan Inclusive Education Initiative Project recognized the need for the expansion of the Project's training resources within the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. As additional sites in the Upper Peninsula were accepted on the Project, the statewide staff revised the model to contract with the MAISD to provide the technical assistance for other districts in the Upper Peninsula (U.P.). The U.P. consists of 15 counties with 7 Intermediate School Districts serving 63 local school districts. This area represents 30% of the state's land mass with only 3.5% of the state's population/school enrollment.

During 1993-94, MAISD established a pilot technical assistance relationship with one local school district which had applied to be an implementation site with the State Initiative. This district is located 3 hours away from the MAISD so a creative plan for technical assistance was agreed upon. The administrative staff at MAISD identified "effective implementers" within their local school districts and developed teams at the elementary, middle and secondary levels for awareness sessions. The teams consisted of parents and general/special educators - including an administrative representative. Visits were arranged for the teams to travel to the new site for pre-arranged awareness sessions followed by site visitations in the implementing schools for more "hands-on observations". These sessions were then supplemented by application-oriented meetings held via video-conference between "match teams" from the districts. The video-conference sessions provided the detailed problem-solving opportunities for staff as they struggled with schedule changes, curriculum accommodations, co-teaching responsibilities and identifying appropriate support services. The capacity for video-conferencing became an integral part of the technical assistance continuum. Through this vehicle, application levels of implementation became possible at the new site.

For the 1994-95 school year, the Office of Special Education, Michigan Department of Education has supported this regional concept of technical assistance and expanded it to all seven Intermediate School Districts in the U.P. A similar process was followed as in 1993-94 with a regional needs assessment conducted in meetings with local educators. Following this, local workshops have been arranged with teams of MAISD educators/parents traveling to the new implementation sites for initial awareness sessions. Matches of elementary, middle or secondary teams are made with consideration for similar size school districts, interests in building plans, e.g. co-teaching, integrated paraprofessional support, types of students being recommended for inclusion. The new regional sites will then arrange for visitations within the MAISD. Follow-up planning will occur via video-conferences wherever the capacity for this exists. All areas of the U.P. are currently in process of installing this technology, but some are not yet operational.

The goals of the regional staff development components are to a) support individuals/districts in their ability to move students into general education environments and to b) support individuals/districts in their abilities to serve students in general education environments. Implementation of these goals requires an intense degree of collaboration, coordination and creativity to "harness the resources that abound within our rural schools to create systems change for ALL kids".

Other components of the regional staff development plan which support these goals include:

- An annual U.P. Special Education Conference held at Northern Michigan University each February, sponsored by the U.P. Special Education Directors (from seven ISD's).

- An annual week-long Summer Institute initiated by MAISD and Northern Michigan University in 1990 and held each year in June on the NMU campus.

- A regional U.P. Staff Development Project coordinated by the U.P. Special Education Directors to increase the capacities of the educational community in effectively serving all students by providing a continuum of staff development opportunities throughout the year. This plan also provides specialty workshops as needed, e.g. ADHD, autism, assistive technology, Tourette's syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and other topics which require study or directly impact the teaching/learning process of children. The principles adhered to in this project focus on plans that a) provide for continuity of events that reinforce/expand the expertise, knowledge base, application skills over time; b) provide for outreach throughout the U.P. to include video-conferencing; c) build a unified staff development system within a district; d) provide opportunities for research in the rural schools; e) investigate various models for staff development within a continuum of life long learning needs; f) develop educators' awareness of new concepts/practices/research; g) integrate the various roles/functions of persons in the educational community/related agencies.

- A biennial U.P. Parent Conference developed by the parents who represent Parent Advisory Committees in the seven ISD's. This conference is supported by the Office of Special Education, Michigan Department of Education, so that there are no registration/meal costs for parents attending. Travel stipends are provided to the degree funds are available.

- Direct coordination with Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan. Most educators throughout the U.P. receive their pre-service training at NMU and seek graduate course-work on campus or through field courses. The Associate Dean for Education is an integral part of the U.P. Special Education Directors Association and meets regularly with the group to support the staff development continuum. The Associate Dean represented the U.P. on the recent State Task Force for Rules Revision of Special Education Rules. The university has representation on most regional planning levels regarding staff development for the U.P.

Evaluation Summary:

The evaluation of the MAISD and initial regional systems change initiatives described in this article have been incorporated into the overall Michigan Inclusive Education Initiative Implementation Report published in 1994 by the developmental Disabilities Institute at Wayne State University and Office of Special Education, Michigan Department of Education. As of 1993-94 the Michigan Inclusive Education Initiative had impacted 23 counties in the state through long-term intense support to 20 implementation sites with an additional 37 counties being impacted through short-term support. The 1994-95 efforts throughout the Upper Peninsula of Michigan are not included in that report.

Statewide summary results as synthesized in the Report include:

- Inclusive education has grown steadily since the first year of implementation in the original seven school districts. The beginning of the fourth year of implementation witnessed a tripling of the number of students being served in regular education full time with support. While these students represent the full range of disability labels, ALL of these students share one characteristic in common: Prior to the implementation of this Initiative, they all were educated in segregated special education classrooms and programs FULL TIME.

- While growth has been most dramatic in the elementary schools, inclusive education has been growing at a steady rate in all grade levels. The beginning of the fourth year of implementation witnessed, at minimum, a doubling of students in each of three educational levels.

- Students in middle school and high school programs are supported primarily through co-teaching models. Elementary students are supported through classroom based services and consultation.

- Since the inception of this Initiative, significant numbers of students with severe disabilities have moved out of segregated schools and classrooms into regular education settings. Clearly the students that have moved from segregated facilities have moved directly into regular education rather than taking an intermediate step into a separate classroom. While progress has been steady, continued support is needed to reduce the ongoing segregation.

An early study specific to the MAISD, based on data collected in 1990-91 with 15 different students from four school districts, highlights some of the indicators of systems change efforts:

- Teacher Support. In general, both general education and special education staff felt supported in their present situations. Sixteen areas of support were identified in the surveys. When support was requested and delivered, it was reported to be effective by both general and special education staff. It was noted that general education teachers tended to be more satisfied than special education staff. There were isolated situations where support had been requested and not delivered.

- Staff Commitments. Open-ended questions and requests for additional information gave respondents ample opportunity to express perceptions concerning inclusive education. None of the comments could be considered anything but supportive. However, a number of concerns were identified. Some examples; the need to better prepare aides for their assignments; the availability of consultants; time for planning and coordination; health problems of some students; and communication among staff.

- Interaction Opportunities. In general, parents and teachers agree on the opportunities of interaction between the included student and the non-handicapped student. The areas in which opportunities are most likely to exist are in school situations, such as: sitting next to others in class; eating lunch; assemblies; and attending art, music and PE. Areas in which interactions are least likely to exist are outside of school, such as: being invited to each others' homes; telephone calls; after-school activities; or going to social events together (e.g. movies, fast-food restaurants). This finding is interesting in that the parents report that their primary concern before including their child was the

possibility of social isolation in the general education setting. However, they believed that their children would have increased opportunities for skill development in the general education setting.

- Interactions. Observation data reveal that non-handicapped students are more likely to initiate interactions (59% of the time) than included students (41% of the time). When these interactions occurred, the initiated interaction was acknowledged 76% of the time. Sixteen percent of the time the initiated interaction was ignored, while 8% of the time the included student's facial/verbal/physical affect was positive, 11% of the time the affect was negative, and 25% of the time a judgement could not be made. Concerning the feelings of parents and teachers about the interactions between included and non-handicapped students, there is a great deal of agreement that the interactions are comfortable, sincere, and not patronizing. In describing the overall climate of the classrooms in which their children were placed, parents used only positive adjectives (e.g. caring, happy, cooperative, etc.)

A follow-up study on "The Impact of Inclusive Education Placements in Michigan" (1993) included the 1990-91 MAISD district data along with that from other areas in the state. In this study 89 students were followed from four different ISD's. A summary of the findings follows:

- In general, parents reported mostly positive changes in family life since including their children in general education settings. Those positive changes include: a) increased interactions with friends of the family, b) interactions with immediate family members, c) decreased behavioral problems presented by the child, and d) increased interactions with extended family members.

- One of the advantages of an inclusive education option is reduced transportation time to and from school. The mean length of transportation time to school after the inclusive education program placement was 19.7 minutes, while the mean length of transportation time to school before the inclusive education program placement was 45.2 minutes.

- Both special education teachers and general education teachers reported that, when requested, they have received effective teacher collaboration and support for inclusion. For both special education teachers and general education teachers, the most effective area was "support of/from other teaching staff". However, special education teachers reported that some (4.5%) of their requests for teacher collaboration and support were not delivered. General education teachers also reported that some (8.5%) of their requests for teacher collaboration and support were not delivered.

- Both parents and teachers perceived that opportunities for student interaction with nondisabled students were enhanced in an inclusive education option. Opportunities for student interaction with non-disabled students in "out-of-school" settings does not appear to be enhanced by placement in general education settings.

- In general, compared to non-disabled students in the same classrooms, included students were more engaged in tutoring by an aide and less engaged in both teacher-directed instruction and individual seat work.

Through the MAISD Accountability Framework for Staff Development, the following data represents averages of annual services provided during the past four years within the 12 local school districts (MAISD):

Number of staff development session	198
Number of staff development hours	558
Number of participants in total sessions	1,859
Number of presenters for total sessions	287

For the past five years, data gathered on the annual Summer Institute indicates an average of 226 persons participating each summer. On an overall 7 point evaluation rating scale, the mean score is 6.24 during this same period of time, reflecting a very high degree of satisfaction.

On a statewide level, the Michigan Inclusive Education Initiative annually provided training/technical assistance for approximately 20,000 professionals, paraprofessionals and parents. The following areas were addressed: program design/administration, student planning process, curriculum integration/ accommodation, instructional models/strategies, social integration/community building, classroom-based ancillary services, classroom management, positive behavioral supports and paraprofessional roles.

Conclusion:

The results reflecting the coordinated efforts of the ISD's in the U.P., in conjunction with the Developmental Disabilities Institute and the Office of Special Education (MDE), demonstrates that systems change can effectively occur in rural schools to expand options for ALL students. The degree of impact on the teaching/learning process for children is highly related to the nature and continuity of staff development experiences provided. Continuing research in this area will be conducted within the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in cooperation with the Developmental Disabilities Institute to develop conclusions over long-term implementation. Currently, however, the ISD's are collaborating with Developmental Disabilities Institute and the Office of Special Education, Michigan Department of Education, to "harness all resources" to create effective educational options for ALL students.

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